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How to Build a Sufi Empire? The Strategies of the Daghestani Shaykh Said-Afandi[2]

Abstract: This paper briefly discusses the rise of the Mahmudiyya in post-Soviet Daghestan, and the political strategies of its leading authority, Shaykh Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii (Atsaev, 1937-2012). How did the Said-Afandi's Mahmudiyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya Sufi brotherhood become a state-supporting and state-supported institution in contemporary Daghestan? I argue that key elements of Said-Afandi's rise into the spotlight were his take-over of the republican Muftiate in the period when the old Soviet Muftiate for the North Caucasus was disintegrating, and the subsequent establishment of a network of Islamic teaching institutes that reached out to both Kumyks and Avars. Here the Mahmudiyya competes with another Khalidiyya branch and especially with the Salafi groups; the latter now appear as the major threat to the secular and multinational republic, while Said-Afandi's propagation of a conservative ethos matched the general conservative stance of the Daghestani and Russian leaderships. Also of importance is the integration of Shadhiliyya elements into Mahmudiyya teaching and practice that make the group's appeal more diverse. Said-Afandi's writings (originally written in Avar) were professionally translated into Russian, with a broad Islamic discourse for the masses and a specialized Sufi discourse for the inner circle. With these missionary policies Said-Afandi reached out not only to the Daghestani nationalities but also to Muslims in other parts of the Russian Federation, from Moscow over Tatarstan to Siberia. At the same not only the Salafi challenge but also the ethnic cleavages in Daghestan itself pose serious limitations to the Mahmudiyya success,

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[2] This paper is based on my chapter "The Discourse of Said-Afandi, Daghestan's Foremost Sufi Master", (2012), in A.K. Bustanov and M. Kemper (Ed.), *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*, Pegasus, Amsterdam, pp. 167-218.

and the question remains whether the current leadership of the brotherhood – after Said-Afandi's tragic death at the hands of a female suicide bomber in the summer of 2012 – will be able to hold the group together.
Key words: Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii, Mahmudiyya, Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya, Sufism in Daghestan.

In this paper I would like to discuss the phenomenon of Shaykh Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii (Atsaev, born 1937, assassinated 28 August 2012), who was Daghestan's (and probably Russia's) foremost Sufi master. What made his Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya mahmudiyya Sufi branch so popular in Daghestan and beyond? My argument is that the rise of the Mahmudiyya starting in the late 1980s was based on a mix of Sufi and political strategies; the first made his teachings popular with a large part of the Muslim population, and the second made him acceptable to the post-Soviet governments in Makhachkala (the capital of the Republic of Daghestan in the Russian Federation) and Moscow, and allowed him to develop the necessary economic assets to establish Mahmudiyya media (esp. books and newspapers), and to get a firm hold on the existing Islamic institutions in Daghestan, including the SpirituSpiritual Administration of Daghestan's Muslims (i.e., the Muftiate), the Council of Islamic Scholars, several Islamic teaching institutes, and many mosques. Challenges to his "Sufi empire" came, on the one hand, from the rising tide of Salafis, including the underground cells that continue to terrorize state and society, and on the other hand from other Sufi groups, with whom Said-Afandi engaged in polemics on Sufi legitimacy (esp. over *silsila*s and rituals). Finally, also the ethnic diversity in Daghestan limited his outreach; he became most popular among some parts of two of the largest ethnic groups of the country, the Avars and Kumyks, but also among these nationalities alternative Islamic groups are present.

The Naqshbandiyya in Daghestan and Jihad

The Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya mahmudiyya (in the following: Mahmudiyya) goes back to the teachings of Mahmud al-Almali (d. 1877), a Daghestani shaykh from the village of Almalo in what is today Northern

Azerbaijan[1]. The Mahmudiyya emerged after the famous Great Caucasus War, as an offshoot of the Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya (in the following: Khalidiyya), some leading shaykhs of which had been associated with the *jihad* of the three Daghestani Imams (Ghazi Muhammad, Hamzat, and Shamil), which lasted from 1828 to 1859. By contrast, Mahmud and his followers are said to have rejected the idea of *jihad* against the Russian conquest, which they regarded as futile. In fact, the new Mahmudiyya branch seems to have stepped into the niche that opened up when many Khalidyya shaykhs of the *jihad* period had perished during the war or were sent into exile.

Still, it was rather slowly that the Mahmudiyya gained adherents in some villages of Avaria and in the northern plains of Daghestan. The most important authorities of the Mahmudiyya were the versatile Sufi shaykh, local Islamic judge, medical doctor, and Jadid thinker Sayfallah-Qadi Bashlarov (d. in 1919 when Denikin's White Army entered Temir-Khan Shura [today Buinaksk])[2], and his disciple Hasan al-Qahi (d. 1937) from the Avar village of Kakhib.

Sayfallah-Qadi Bashlarov (obviously through contacts that he established during a period of exile in the Volga region) is particularly important because he introduced the Shadhiliyya Sufi brotherhood to Daghestan. The Shadhiliyya affiliation did not supplant the Naqshbandiyya (khalidiyya) mahmudiyya but united with it, in a curious combination: since Bashlarov's time the Daghestani Mahmudiyya shaykhs use to teach Shadhiliyya practices (including the "loud", vocal *dhikr*) to the beginners on the Sufi path, as a kind of propedeuticum, and only when a *murid* has progressed on that path to a certain level he is initiated into the practices of the Mahmudiyya (including the techniques characteristic for the Khalidiyya, esp. the silent *dhikr*, the *rabita* and the *muraqaba*). The Shadhiliyya, with its easy and impressive "populist" rituals, is thus meant to attract the masses, while the Naqshbandiyya mahmudiyya techniques are reserved for the chosen few [Kemper, 2002][3].

In the Soviet period both branches of the Naqshbandiyya, the "older" Khalidiyya and the "newer" Mahmudiyya, suffered immensely from political repression (Mahmudiyya master Hasan al-Qahi, a prolific

[1] On him see: Kemper, 2011.
[2] On him see: Shikhaliev, 2003.
[3] Also published in Russian: Kemper, 2003. See also Shikhaliev, 2009.

writer of Sufi treatises and epistles, was executed in 1937), but both branches survived, and partly even expanded into areas of Daghestan where they had no adherents before. An important factor in this new, "Soviet" spread of the Naqshbandiyya were the massive resettlement campaigns of the 1950s to 1970s when whole village communities from the mountains were brought to the kolkhozes in the plains; with the settlers also came the religiosity and the religious traditions of the mountaineers.

Yet these movements of populations do not yet explain the rise of the Mahmudiyya, which in the 1970s and 1980s was still limited to some villages; only since the early 1990s the Mahmudiyya gained a wide spread in Avaria and also in the Kumyk areas of Daghestan. Here several factors seem to have been at work.

The most important of these factors is that Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii (a disciple of several Mahmudiyya shaykhs of the Soviet period) managed to get a hold on the Muftiate, that is, on the state-supported Muslim Spiritual Administration. This happened in February 1992, when the old Soviet Muftiate for the North Caucasus (located in Makhachkala) disintegrated; with the collapse of the USSR each North Caucasus republic of the Russian Federation established its own Muftiate. Consequently, the Muslim Spiritual Administration in Makhachkala was turned into a Muftiate for Daghestan (DUMD, Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Daghestan). At that time Kumyk and Avar factions struggled for control over the new Daghestani Muftiate. To balance the ethnic interests, the Kumyk Bagautdin Isaev was elected Mufti and the Avar Magomedkhadzhi Aliev was made chairman of Daghestan's Council of Alims. In January/February 1992 Aliev convened a meeting of the Council of Alims, in the absence of the Mufti who was on a trip abroad. The convention stormed the DUMD building and sealed it. When on 15 February the convention was continued, the Kumyk and Dargin imams, and some Avars, left the meeting in protest, arguing that one would have to wait for the return of Mufti Isaev. The remaining participants were Avars, and mostly Mahmudiyya *murid*s of Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii. They announced to convene a Conference of the Muslims of Daghestan, which indeed took place on 29 February 1992 but was not attended by the Dargins, Kumyks, Lezgins, Tabasaranis and Laks, and by a part of the Avar imams. The conference (in Makhachkala's Russian Drama theatre), attended by more than 150 delegates, elected Abdurakhimkhadzhi Magomedov (the director of a new madrasa in Sositli, Khasaviurt region) as chairman of the Council of Alims, and asked the Council to elect a new

Mufti. The first Council meeting then took place on 2 March 1992, and led to the election of Said-Akhmedkhadzhi Darbishgadzhiev (an Avar from Mekhel'ta who lived in Endirei, Khasaviurt raion) to the position of Daghestan's Mufti.

This chain of events thus resulted in an Avar takeover of DUMD, and it put the disciples of Said-Afandi into key positions. This in turn triggered the establishment of other national muftiates in Daghestan. On 12 March 1993 the Laks established their "Society for the Support of the Spiritual Renaissance of the Lak People", led by Gasan Gasanov, a medical doctor from Buinaksk. On 25 April a conference of the Kumyk people resulted in the establishment of a Kumyk Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Daghestan (KDUMD), headed by former DUMD Mufti Isaev. A year later the Dargins followed with a Dargin DUMD, and elected Abdulla-Khadzhi Aligadzhiev as Mufti. Finally, by the end of 1993 a Conference of the Muslims of South Daghestan (mainly Lezgis) elected Mavledin Latinov as their Mufti, who had been imam in the town of Dagestanskie Ogni.

In September 1994 the Daghestani government attempted to unite all of these "ethnic" Daghestani Spiritual Administrations under DUMD. This plan envisaged that the four newly-emerged national Muftis would henceforth be regarded as deputies of the ("central", yet in fact Avar) DUMD. This agreement was however not implemented; instead, DUMD continued to be dominated by Avars, mainly by *murid*s of Said-Afandi [Kemper and Shihaliev, 2012]. With other words, it is inter-ethnic competition that propelled Said-Afandi to political and religious positions of power.

A second important factor leading to the rise of Said-Afandi to republican prominence was that he managed to make inroads into the Kumyk camp. In particular, Said-Afandi found an effective deputy in the Kumyk Arslanali Gamzatov, a well-known scholar and a charismatic speaker who boosted the spread of the *tariqa* among the Kumyks in the Buinaksk area. Buinaksk is also close to Said-Afandi's birthplace Chirkei (in Avaria), and in the mid-1990s Gamzatov directed the new Saifullah-Qadi Islamic University in Buinaksk, which produced a lot of graduates-*murid*s. After the establishment of the "Avar" Muslim Spiritual Administration of Daghestan the Buinaksk Friday mosque became the center for the spread of the Mahmudiyya in the city, and the mosques in the area around Buinaksk were almost all equipped with imams from the Mahmudiyya, who had been educated by Gamzatov. By contrast, the Mahmudiyya has

not too many adherents among the Kumyks in the North of Daghestan (Khasaviurt and Babaiurt raions); here the "old" Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya as well as Salafi groups enjoy more support. The Northern Kumyks, as well as those of Karabudakhkent region (where the Khalidiyya has traditionally been strong) often regard Arslanali Gamzatov as a "traitor" to the Kumyk cause who went over to the Avar side; the background is that the Kumyk Gamzatov had previously been a *murid* of the Kumyk shaykh Muhammad-Amin Gadzhiev of Paraul, who represented the Khalidiyya.

According to the academic Arabist Shamil Shikhaliev (Makhachkala / Bochum), the question where Kumyks do or do not accept the Mahmudiyya has to do with where they have traditionally been in conflict with the Avars. In the Buinaksk region relations between the two nationalities were relatively good, since there had been no resettlement campaigns in this area, so that the autochthonous Kumyks did not regard the Avars as a threat, and did not have grievances against them; by contrast, the northern Kumyks prefer to follow Dargin Khalidiyya shaykhs or Salafism, to distinguish themselves from the Avars who were settled in the North in the seventies, many of whom "brought with them" their Khalidiyya affiliation from their home areas in the mountains. At the same time the Mahmudiyya also spread in the very north of Daghestan, in the Noghai steppe territories; this development results from the circumstance that many Noghai students (and a few Kumyks from the North) studied at Gamzatov's Islamic University in Buinaksk. The distribution of the two competing Naqshbandiyya branches is thus very much linked to the ethnic relations that resulted from Soviet agricultural resettlement policies.

Ethnic fragmentation also came to characterize the inner structure of the Mahmudiyya, with competing shaykhs of local influence in various villages. In general, Kumyk shaykhs largely attract Kumyk disciples and remain at distance from Avar shaykhs of the same branch of the brotherhood. Differences between these "ethnic" groups of the Mahmudiyya are reflected in the ornament of the embroidered skullcaps of the men, which vary from village to village and thereby reflect the different Mahmudiyya identities related to the local shaykhs. Said-Afandi, in recent years increasingly fragile, seemed to hold this complex Sufi structure together through his charisma and authority. Interesting is that Said-Afandi also gained followers in other parts of the Russian Federation; we know of at least one case from Western Siberia where the whole male population of a Siberian Tatar

village "converted" to Said-Afandi's Mahmudiyya, although the personal links with Said-Afandi seem to have been minimal or even absent. In this case the acceptance of the Mahmudiyya teachings and of its line of transmission from faraway Daghestan have a very different meaning, in a very different context[1].

The Mahmudiyya under Said-Afandi

Today the quasi-official "Islamic establishment" of Daghestan, especially the Council of Islamic Scholars (*Sovet ulemov*) and the Muftiate (Daghestan's Muslim Spiritual Administration) in Makhachkala, but also the directors and teachers of most of the ten or twelve Islamic teaching institutes in the country, are known to be his loyal *murid*s [Bobrovnikov et al., 2009].

Under his leadership the Mahmudiyya has embarked upon a large project of publishing Mahmudiyya texts; among these we find very professional academic editions of the important scholarly works and letters of Bashlarov and Hasan al-Qahi (in Arabic, but partly also in Russian translation) that reflect the emergence of the dual Shadhili-Mahmudi teaching, and also a fine Arabic collection of Sufi biographies from Daghestan, written by Shaykh Shu'ayb Afandi al-Bagini (d. 1912) from the Avar village of Baginub[2]. More affordable and popular are a multitude of brochures on individual shaykhs of the Mahmudiyya, in the Avar language or in Russian; these works depict the Mahmudiyya shaykhs of the 1900s to 1980s as if they had been the major and only Naqshbandiyya masters in the country of the Soviet period, and they present their alleged sayings as expressions of a general "wisdom of the mountains" [Gorskaia mudrost'…, 2009]. What we see here is a new type of post-Soviet hagiographies, with indications of the locations of the burial places of these saints. Also Said-Afandi's own works, produced in the Avar language, have been professionally translated into Russian by his *murid*s, and can be found in many bookstores not only in Daghestan but also in other parts of Russia, where Said Afandi has won new (non-Daghestani) adherents. Finally, also the Internet seems to play a significant role in the spread of his authority.

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[1] For the case of Novoat'ialovo village, see: Bustanov, 2012.

[2] The most important of these Arabic-language publications are: al-Bagini, 1996; Mir Khalid Sayfallah, 1998; al-Qahi, 1998.

The Mahmudiyya's rivals from the Khalidiyya branch do not seem to have the resources to come up with a similar series of publications, which means that the Mahmudiyya also dominates the Islamic book market in Daghestan. The conflict between the two Naqshbandiyya branches is largely revolving around two issues, namely the proper conduct of the shaykhs and their *murid*s in private and public and the question of their Sufi credentials, expressed in mutual accusations of not having a correct *silsila*, that is, of not having a proper license to teach, of being a "false shaykh" (*mutashayyikh* in Arabic, which can be translated as "somebody who claims to be a shaykh but who has not received the respective Sufi education and has never obtained a full-fledged Sufi diploma [*ijaza*] from a respected shaykh"). Also within the Mahmudiyya there are divisions and tensions, and some of the shaykhs from Said-Afandi's camp can act as Shadhiliyya shaykhs only, and are not regarded as having reached the higher stage of Naqshbandiyya mahmudiyya teachings. Reportedly Shaykh Arslanali Gamzatov, the above-mentioned director of the Sayfullah-Qadi Bashlarov Islamic University in Buinaksk, had at one point seen his Mahmudiyya license "revoked" by Said-Afandi, meaning he was humiliated and downgraded to the status of "only" a Shadhiliyya shaykh. Obviously Gamzatov was becoming too prominent in Said-Afandi's eyes.

The dominance of the Avar Mahmudiyya-shaykh Said-Afandi over the Islamic establishment in Daghestan is to a large degree also a reflectiont of the political system in the country, which is sometimes described as a form of "consociationalism", which entails that political representation is largely linked to ethnic census; the underlying idea is that also the smallest of the twenty-five or so Daghestani ethnic groups should have "their" representatives in the parliament and in the administration. Reportedly, also the ministries and important resources are usually divided up between the major Daghestani nations, especially the Dargins, Avars, and Kumyks; the Laks, Lezgis, Azeris, Noghais and the many smaller groups have less of a say on republican level but have their representatives locally [Ware and Kisriev, 2010]. In this "deal", the Avars – and Said-Afandi's Mahmudiyya in particular – have secured for themselves control over the state-supported religious administration and the Islamic institutes, including the Islamic foundations (important for the *hajj* pilgrimage, mosque construction, publications and public events, and for business in general). However, attempts of the Avars to establish Avar imams also in non-Avar

territories (e.g in Daghestan's South) have repeatedly led to conflict [Matsuzato and Ibragimov, 2005].

Today the biggest challenge to the status quo in Daghestan, and thus also to Sufism and in particular to the prominent role of the Mahmudiyya, is political Salafism. Since the 1990s Daghestan has been caught up in several waves of violence, first in connection with the events in Chechnya (and the emergence of the Salafi communities around the Lak village of Kadar, which was stormed by the army and eliminated in late 1999) but at present above all in the context of many "homegrown", Daghestani Salafi communities (*jama'at*s) in various parts of the republic. Dissatisfied with the miserable economy, widespread corruption and clientilism, many young Muslims have turned their back on the system and joint the "Brothers in the Forests", that is, the militant Islamic underground, which is loosely connected to the (virtual) "Islamic Emirate" of the Chechen warlord/terrorist Dokku Umarov[1]. Today, violent attacks on policemen and officials occur in Daghestan almost on a daily basis, and also many public representatives of Islam have been killed by radicals (at least this is usually the official version), including several Muftis, Sufi masters, and professors of Islam.

On 28 August 2012 also the 74-year old Said-Afandi was killed in a suicide terrorist attack. According to the news reports, a Russian woman who had converted to Islam (and who had lost her husband in the armed struggle) approached Said-Afandi during his sermon in his native Chirkei and detonated her bomb, also killing several other people. It remains to be seen which consequences this tragic event will have for the further development of the Mahmudiyya.

Against the background of these inner-Islamic conflicts, Said-Afandi's writings had a double goal: first to defend the Mahmudiyya teachings and the position of Said-Afandi himself vis-a-vis other Sufi groups, and second to denounce the Daghestani Islamic radicals as "Wahhabis", that is, as puppets of foreign Islamists from the Gulf region. The latter approach is a central tenet of the Kremlin's policies towards Islam, and also of Muslim projects of constructing a state-loyal "traditional Islam" in Russia (including the version that was promoted in Tatarstan by the late Valiulla Iakupov, who was equally assassinated by radicals in the summer of 2012) [Bustanov

[1] On Dokku Umarov's Islamic discourse see: Kemper, 2012. For Salafi discourses see also: Knysh, 2012; and Kurbanov, 2010.

and Kemper, 2013]. The Mahmudiyya therefore appears, to a degree, as a state-supporting and state-supported version of Islam; and it is no wonder that Said-Afandi refrained from sharply criticizing the republican leadership or the Kremlin in public. In their shadow Said-Afandi had much freedom for popularizing his view of Islam, and for exerting, as the grey eminence, his influence on Daghestani Islamic affairs.

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